

Natural Selections

Newsletter of the Penobscot Valley Chapter of Maine Audubon



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN:

Get Outside this Winter

BY GORDON RUSSELL, PRESIDENT
PENOBSCOT VALLEY CHAPTER OF MAINE AUDUBON

It's difficult to predict what this upcoming winter will bring. Changing climate conditions make it hard to know whether to break out the snowshoes, or keep the hiking boots handy. The never-ending coronavirus saga leaves us not knowing whether or when we'll be able meet indoors or go to the grocery store without a mask. One thing that is certain, however, is that the natural world continues to exist around us, offering opportunities for exploration and enrichment.

Perhaps you're already an active outdoors person. You have favorite trails to hike, snowshoe or cross-country ski. Hopefully, in addition to logging steps or miles, you will take time to notice the world around you. When you stop to rest, watch and listen for bird activity. Chances are you'll notice golden-crowned kinglets, juncos or chickadees calling or foraging in the forest. Likely, there will also be a hairy, downy or pileated woodpecker to attract your attention. If there's snow on the ground, you can usually find the tracks left by squirrels, snowshoe hare or deer, or something less common like fisher or bobcat. You can also challenge yourself by trying to identify winter trees and other plants when they lack familiar leaves and flowers. Also, don't overlook your own yard. When I walk down to get the paper on a snowy morning, there's always a fresh set of tracks to check out. In short, there's always something out there to get your attention.

The Penobscot Valley Chapter volunteers and Fields Pond Audubon Center staff are also on hand to help you get in touch with the natural world this winter. Check out the various programs described in this issue of Natural Selections. Please join us for one of these activities, and bring a friend or family member. Look us up on Facebook, and share your experiences this winter. Please let us know how we can better serve you, as you explore Maine's vast expanses of wildlife habitat. You can email penobscotvalleyaudubon@gmail.com, sign up for our weekly email updates, or contact me or any of the other officers and board members listed on Page Two of this newsletter.

December 2021–February 2022

NATURE NOTES: BARK FOR BEGINNERS

BY GLORIA VOLLMEYERS



While skiing on an Orono Land Trust property last winter, I found a few trees with black or steel-gray bark. It is difficult to tell the difference between cherry and birch species on the young trunks, according to Bill Livingston from UMaine Forestry. Pin cherry has orange lenticles (little horizontal short lines). Black cherry has white lenticles, as does black or sweet birch. Though it's hard to see in the picture on the left, this tree has white lenticles - but that does not make for a definitive identification. Black birches

will have catkins for spring flowers, and if I see them, it's a birch. The twigs of black birch have a wintergreen taste; cherry twigs typically will be bitter. Maybe I'll chew on a twig this winter, or else I'll have to hike out there in spring to see if it has cherry flowers or birch catkins.

The picture on the right is a beech tree. In Maine, they don't have the smooth bark you'll find south of here. The bark is deformed by cankers caused by beech bark disease.



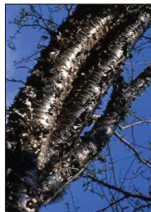
I'm fond of birch trees, and most can be identified by their bark all year. The first three pictures here show some native Maine birches.

To the left is a gray birch. They tend to look dirty, and they are weak trees. They'll bend over like croquet hoops in wet heavy snow or ice storms. They don't peel.

The picture on the right is a paper birch (aka white birch, or canoe birch). They peel, and the underside of the peel is orange. Yes this is the tree Native Americans have used for centuries to make birchbark canoes.

This next picture (left) is a yellow birch. The bark peels into a bunch of curly ribbons, and although it looks quite dark in this photo, it typically has a pale yellow to dull silver-tan color.

The final tree pictured is a river birch. It is a beautiful tree, but it is not native to Maine. You will not find them out skiing in the woods, but they are common ornamentals along the Bangor and Brewer waterfronts, and in front yards throughout our area. All pictures were taken by me in Orono or Brewer, except for the yellow birch. That one came from the UMaine Extension website.



MAINE AUDUBON

Penobscot Valley Chapter

Natural Selections

Natural Selections is published four times a year by the Penobscot Valley Chapter of Maine Audubon. Maine Audubon members living in the Penobscot Valley region automatically become chapter members and receive Natural Selections at no additional charge. Membership in Maine Audubon costs per year:

\$50 household; \$40 individual

\$30 senior/volunteer

Membership benefits include a discount on programs and purchases at all Maine Audubon stores as well as a subscription to the quarterly periodical *Habitat*.

The chapter offers a weekly email service to remind members about upcoming events in our region plus electronic delivery of this newsletter upon request. Please email Jim Zeman, kjzeman@hotmail.com to sign up for these services.

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<https://pvc.maineaudubon.org>

 www.facebook.com/penobscotvalleyaudubon

FIELDS POND JOURNAL

BY DAVID LAMON, FPAC MANAGER
FIELDS POND AUDUBON CENTER

It was 24 years ago this month that the L. Robert Rolde Nature Center at Fields Pond was opened to the public with a celebratory gathering. A “green” building for its time, I can attest to its tight construction after working in it for over three years. The building’s orientation on the property was also carefully considered, with plenty of south-facing window area to provide passive solar benefits. Fortunately, the main part of the building’s roof has a southern facing slope, making it a perfect platform for active solar collection as well.

This fall, ReVision Energy completed the installation of a 39-panel solar array on top of the building’s roof. This project is part of Maine Audubon’s commitment to making the Fields Pond facility a “net-zero” carbon emissions building. With the newly installed rooftop photovoltaic system, and energy-efficient heat pumps replacing our former propane heating system, the Fields Pond Audubon Center is set to be 100% powered by the sun!

In addition to these exciting changes to our existing building, we broke ground this fall on a new building project. The

old fabric tent structure over the picnic table is being replaced with a permanent pavilion, which will also provide outdoor classroom space. The work is being completed by students from the University of Maine’s Construction Engineering Technology (CET) program. The CET curriculum is a blend of civil engineering, technology, and construction business management, offering a practice-oriented education that prepares students for careers in the construction industry. Each Friday, CET students have shown up at the Fields Pond worksite to apply their academic theory toward the completion of an actual construction project. The materials for this project have all been locally sourced, using 100% Maine-grown hemlock timbers and recycled metal roofing. COVID has taught us all about how important sheltered outdoor spaces can be for communities needing space to convene, learn, or celebrate.

Although we won’t be convening a large-group gala event for these improvements like there was 24 years ago, we hope you’ll help us celebrate these new changes by visiting and supporting Fields Pond often in the coming year!



Installing solar panels. Photo credit David Lamon

What You Don't Know About Winter Ducks

by Bob Duchesne

Maine is a four-season state, and every season has great birds to chase. In winter, you can usually count on finding large numbers of ducks along Maine's coast, mostly because our ocean doesn't freeze. Northern sea ducks fly south to Maine for the winter, abandoning the frozen waters of Hudson Bay and beyond.

Watchable ducks include common eiders, red-breasted mergansers, harlequin ducks, and three species of scoter: surf, black, and white-winged. Horned and red-necked grebes come down. Red-throated loons visit in small numbers, and common loons return to the ocean from the inland lakes where they breed. And then there are two small ducks that are not only cute, they're fascinating once you know their secrets. Here are some juicy tidbits about buffleheads and long-tailed ducks.

Most wintering waterfowl aren't excited about being tossed around in big surf. They often tuck in close to shore, sheltered in bays. Many are shallow divers, which is another reason they stay close enough to shore that you can find them easily, even through the car window on a frigid day.

The bufflehead is North America's smallest diving duck, and it's wicked cute. The male is dark on top, white below, with a big white patch across the back of its large round head. Females are a solid brown with a white ear spot. Buffleheads feed on invertebrates, crustaceans, and mollusks. Thus, they are not deep divers. Since they don't chase fish, they don't stay submerged very long. They can usually be seen popping up and down close to shore, seldom staying underwater for more than 15 seconds.

Here's the weird thing. Buffleheads are cavity nesters, and not just any cavity. They're almost entirely dependent on using the old nests of northern flickers. Flicker holes are too small for other cavity-nesting ducks, such as goldeneyes, mergansers, and wood ducks. They're just right for buffleheads.



*Long-tailed ducks, top and Buffleheads, bottom.
Photo credit Bob Duchesne*

Because we mostly see buffleheads on saltwater, Mainers tend to think of them as ocean birds. In reality, they nest on freshwater, and they use freshwater routes to migrate. They prefer freshwater wintering sites in states with milder climates. The only reason we see them

on saltwater is because our freshwater is frozen.

The long-tailed duck is possibly the most elegant diving duck you'll see during a Maine winter. Like the bufflehead, its principal diet consists of invertebrates. However, it will also take small fish, and it's capable of diving deeper than most ducks. It prefers to feed near the bottom and it can dive 200 feet deep, so it often stays underwater for a long time. Long-tailed ducks migrate to saltwater in winter, and stay close to the coast as far south as Virginia. However, they also winter on freshwater in the Great Lakes, and they nest primarily in freshwater wetlands in the subarctic.

Here's the weird thing about long-tailed ducks. Most bird species molt into brightly-colored breeding plumage during late spring. But long-tailed ducks molt twice each year. Their courtship starts in late winter, while they are still in Maine. So the males take on their prettiest feathers here to attract mates, pair up, then molt back into a drab brown plumage before returning to their far-north breeding grounds.

Long-tailed ducks are quite vocal, calling a distinctive "owl-owl-let," audible at a distance. Buffleheads are nearly silent all winter. Both are edible. Maybe. They are considered game birds in Maine, though it must take a lot of these small ducks to make a meal. Like most diving ducks, they're best prepared with loads of creativity, in order to disguise the flavor. John James Audubon described the flavor of long-tailed ducks thus: "Their flesh is none of the best, being dark, generally tough, and to the taste fishy." Umm, you can have my portion.



*CET students position support beams for new FPAC pavilion.
Photo credit David Lamon*



*Making progress!
Photo credit David Lamon*

PENOBSCOT VALLEY CHAPTER WINTER PROGRAMS

We invite you to join us as we explore Maine's natural history and environmental concerns, with special attention to the abundant wildlife and diverse ecosystems within the Penobscot Valley region. Free monthly programs that follow the school year calendar (October-May, no January) are one of the many benefits of your membership in the Penobscot Valley Chapter of Maine Audubon. All chapter programs are open to the general public, so feel free to bring a friend or an out-of-town guest!

At press time (November 2021), we made the difficult decision to once again cancel our annual Holiday Party, originally scheduled for December 3 at Fields Pond Audubon Center. The Delta variant of COVID-19 was still widely circulating in Penobscot County, the hospitalization rate was the highest it had been since the start of the pandemic, and there were only 49 unoccupied intensive care beds remaining in the entire state. In light of those grim statistics, we decided to forgo the opportunity to host an indoor Super-Spreader Event! We'll all keep our fingers crossed that increasing vaccination rates will finally bring this horrible virus into check, and we'll all be able to meet in person to celebrate next December. We will deliver items directly to winning bidder's homes for this year's online auction, unless you make special arrangements in advance to pick them up at FPAC.

WILD TURKEYS IN MAINE

Friday, February 4, 7:00 p.m.,
at FPAC or via Zoom*

Very few species-recovery attempts in Maine can boast the overwhelming success story behind the reintroduction of the wild turkey. The species had been completely extirpated from the state by the early 1800s. A small breeding population was finally re-established in York County in the 1970s, after several earlier attempts had failed. Today, wild turkeys can be found in abundance throughout Maine. Kelsey Sullivan, the turkey wildlife specialist at Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, will speak on wild turkey population ecology and management. He will present the results of a three-year study, in collaboration with the University of Maine, that used radio telemetry to track turkey movements and evaluate their nesting success.

*We will make a final decision on whether it is safe to hold this meeting

in person in late January. If we are able to meet indoors at FPAC, all attendees are requested to mask regardless of vaccination status. We request that you also maintain adequate spacing between chairs, unless you share a household. If on the other hand the pandemic continues to run rampant in the Bangor area, we will conduct this program via Zoom. We will let members know about the switch to Zoom at least five days in advance, via

the chapter listserv (send an email request to kjzeman@hotmail.com if you wish to receive weekly updates and reminders from PVC), and also on our website, <https://pvc.maineaudubon.org>, both with a link to register for the Zoom program. Maine Audubon has a 1000-person Zoom account that it shares with the chapters, so you don't have to worry about not getting a space if you register at the last minute.

POSTCARD FROM AWAY: HILTON HEAD, SC

by Gloria Vollmers

I have been vacationing in the Sea Pines area of Hilton Head Island, an upscale, gated community where the condos are called "villas" and multimillion-dollar homes abound. Lots of ponds (with alligators!) and golf courses. No stop lights, no street lights, no litter, no motorcycles, and very little parking outside of your rental lodging; you can't just stop, park and walk around. There are, however, miles of flat walking and biking paths, and it seems like everyone owns or rents a bike. There is definitely a Disney-esque feel here. Yards are perfectly manicured, all the streets are named for birds, the buildings all have height limits and strict design standards. Beyond the community's commitment to green spaces, there are several large nature preserves on the island - and of course, miles of saltwater shoreline, the main reason why this resort community was established. The most common tree here is the red pine, followed by various species of palms and palmettos.

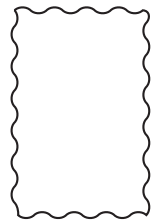
But you are all more interested in the birds. There are plenty of familiar ones to Mainers, like cardinals and house sparrows. In fact, in the "Birds of the Carolinas" book I picked up, I was disappointed to find only a few birds I couldn't see back home in Bangor. Mostly shorebirds have presented themselves. Lots of brown pelicans, plus royal, sandwich, common, and Forster's terns, and black skimmers. Several gulls we could not identify were sitting alongside the laughing and herring gulls, making me wish we

had a spotting scope.

For a unique sound, listen online to the fish crow! [Editor's note: there is now a small but expanding population of fish crows in the Little City neighborhood of Bangor, near St. Joseph's Hospital.] I put a new

species on my life list, the little blue heron. The juveniles are pure white, not blue at all except for a bluish bill. Tricolored herons are also fairly common here, and we have spotted a few small flocks of white ibis. We happened upon a Carolina wren, which has a song remarkably like that of the common yellowthroat. An eastern towhee lurks in the bushes outside our balcony, not far from the ospreys that hunt over the Calibogue Sound every day. The last bird I'll note is the pine warbler on its wintering grounds. It's a common species here, and easy to see. It seems to enjoy hanging around at the base of the pine trees rather than secluding itself high above, as it does during breeding season in Maine. Several butterflies are superabundant right now: the gulf fritillary, the long-tailed skipper, and the cloudless sulphur. I think I saw a monarch, but not sure.

We took a boat excursion to Savannah via the inland waterway and saw two more southern bird species, wood storks and roseate spoonbills. According to the boat's captain, the roseate spoonbills were blown up here by a recent Gulf Coast hurricane, and they seemed to like their new home. Meanwhile, it appeared that the wood storks were making them feel welcome in their roosting trees.



FIELDS POND AUDUBON CENTER PROGRAMS - WINTER 2021-22

Register for all programs online at <https://maineaudubon.org/events/>

Night Tree Story Walk

December 1-31

You're invited to bring a wildlife-friendly ornament to hang on our very own Night Tree at Fields Pond, and enjoy the classic children's book, *Night Tree*, by Eve Bunting on a storywalk along the trail behind the FPAC building. Some bird-friendly ornament suggestions include:

- Pine cone feeders, covered with peanut butter and birdseed.
- Small suet balls or suet cakes in holiday shapes, or small mesh bags of suet.
- Strings of fruits such as apple, pear, or orange chunks, raisins, or cranberries.
- Dried sunflower heads, or stalks of dried millet or other grain.

Double Discount Day at FPAC

December 11, 10am - 4pm

Come shop for your holiday gift list at our Nature Store, and support Maine Audubon at the same time! We'll have special seasonal gift merchandise available, as well as books, birdfeeders and seed. Maine Audubon members receive a double discount of 20 percent all day long. Yes, you can also get the discount if you sign up as a new member on Double Discount Day!

Winter Walk: Wildlife Adaptations

Saturday, December 11, 10am - 12pm

Join the FPAC staff for a winter walk on the sanctuary trails! As we enjoy the winter landscape, we will discuss the different adaptations that our native wildlife have developed to survive the Maine winter.

"Bringing Nature Home" in Maine this Winter (an in-person, indoor activity)

Two dates offered, identical program at each:

Saturday, December 18, 10 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

Thursday, January 13, 10 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

In this hands-on seed-sowing workshop, Maine Audubon staff will introduce native seed propagation and techniques for growing your own wildflowers and other plants from seed. Participants will leave with several pots sown with seeds, ready for maintenance-free outdoor germination.

Read & Ramble

Weekly on Wednesdays, January 12 - February 16

10-10:30 a.m., OR 11-11:30 a.m.

Registration required. All children must be accompanied by an adult.

Join us for an interactive story adventure in the outdoors, geared towards children ages 2-5 and their grown-ups. Afterwards, we'll set you up with a related, self-guided activity to enjoy on the trails. The building will be open beginning at 10 a.m. for those who wish to warm up, use the restroom, or shop in the Nature Store. Visit maineaudubon.org/events for a more detailed list of dates and topics!

Gardening in Winter...and All Year Long!

Wednesday, January 12, 7 p.m.

Online via Zoom;

preregistration required

Cathy Rees, author of *Winterland: Create a beautiful garden for every season*, will describe how to craft a rich and compelling all-season garden by offering design strategies and practical advice on garden care, pruning, maintenance and coexisting with animals and birds. Cathy Rees is cofounder of Native Gardens of Blue Hill in Maine. NOTE: This will be

a free online program, and the link will be provided upon registration at maineaudubon.org/events.

Moonlight Snowshoe Hikes

January 17, 6 p.m. & February 18, 6:30 p.m.

Join us for a peaceful winter's night hike on the sanctuary grounds. FPAC is normally closed to the public at sunset, so this is a rare opportunity to explore the sanctuary at night. These special treks will be limited in group size, and a limited number of snowshoes are available by advance reservation only. Please call 207-989-2591 to reserve yours, and specify the number of adult and child sizes needed.

Motus in Maine: Research and Education

Thursday, January 20th, 6:30 p.m. Online via Zoom; preregistration required

Since its installation in the Spring of 2021, the FPAC Motus Tower has been recording the wildlife species that pass through with radio tags. This data is part of the international collaborative Motus network, collecting data on the movement of wildlife species to inform ecology and conservation research. Join us for a presentation on the use of Motus technology in Maine, the wildlife species that are being tracked, and its many scientific and educational uses. NOTE: This will be a free online program, and the link will be provided upon registration at maineaudubon.org/events.

Winter Fun Day

Saturday, Feb. 5, 11 a.m.-2 p.m.

A day to celebrate all things winter! Activities will be offered for the whole family. A complete schedule will be published closer to the event date. Please call the Fields

Pond Audubon Center at 989-2951, or find us on Facebook for more details. Free for all!

"Who Goes There?" An Outdoor Tracking Walk at Fields Pond

Saturday, February 12, 9-11 a.m.

Join Maine Audubon staff for a 2-hour, easy walk around the sanctuary property looking for evidence of winter critters in the landscape. We will look for signs big and small - ranging from tracks in the snow (hopefully) to evidence of animals feeding. The walk will be easy - often when there is much to see, we actually don't get very far at all! Space is limited, and pre-registration is required.

February Vacation Winter Explorations Grades 1-5

February Vacation Week

(February 22-25), 10-11:30 a.m.

Pre-registration required. Limit of 12 participants; all children must be accompanied by an adult (no charge for adult)

This year during February Vacation, we're offering daily morning walks and explorations focused on winter wildlife that use the different habitats at Fields Pond. Learners in Grades 1-5 (each must be accompanied by a grownup) will join our educators for 1.5 hours of outdoor winter wandering and wondering! We'll bundle up & stay outside for the entire length of the program, exploring the sanctuary through the lens of a different theme each day. What winter fun and amazement will we find together?

- Tracking Walk Tuesday
- Winter Birds Wednesday
- Snow Science & Art Thursday
- Homes & Habitats Friday

MAINE AUDUBON

Penobscot Valley Chapter

c/o Fields Pond Audubon Center
216 Fields Pond Road
Holden, Maine 04429

Mission of the Penobscot Valley Chapter:
*Conserving wildlife and wildlife habitat by
connecting people to our regional natural heritage,
through enjoyable and meaningful activities
that educate and promote greater environmental
awareness.*

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WELCOME TO PVC NEW AND REJOINING MEMBERS!

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Hannah Fishburn, Charleston
Byron Hale, Bangor
Paul Howard, Glenburn
Elaine Peresluha, Islesboro
Caren Plank, Monroe
Geraldine Shaw, Orrington
Kristina Sullivan, Bangor
James Thomas, Hampden
Elijah Vollendorf, Hampden

FIELDS POND BOOK GROUP

The Fields Pond Book Group meets monthly on Thursday nights at 6:30 p.m. At press time, all meetings were still being conducted via Zoom, facilitated by professional librarian Joyce Rumery. Please contact Joyce directly at rumeryj9@gmail.com to be added to the mailing list for the Zoom meeting links and any in-person meeting updates. Here is the title and synopsis for February. The group will not meet in December or January.

February 10, 2022

Kaku, Michio. *The God Equation: The Quest for a Theory of Everything*. 240 pages.

When Newton discovered the law of gravity, he unified the rules governing the heavens and the Earth. Since then, physicists have been placing new forces into ever-grander theories. But perhaps the ultimate challenge is achieving a monumental synthesis of the two remaining theories—relativity and the quantum theory. This would be the crowning achievement of science, a profound merging of all the forces of nature into one beautiful, magnificent equation to unlock the deepest mysteries in science: What happened before the Big Bang? What lies on the other side of a black hole? Are there other universes and dimensions? Is time travel possible? Why are we here? Kaku also explains the intense controversy swirling around this theory, with Nobel laureates taking opposite sides on this vital question. It is a captivating, gripping story; what's at stake is nothing less than our conception of the universe.